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ABSTRACT

This document presents the first of five newsletters on sex education for parents. The newsletters were designed to help parents increase their ability to communicate with their adolescents about sexual issues. They explore the origins of the parents' feelings about sex; teach the importance of a healthy self-concept and how to build it in the adolescent; unravel the physical, social, and emotional mysteries of adolescence; and develop some skills that will help parents talk about sex with their adolescents. The specific goals of this newsletter on sexuality are to help parents: (1) know the importance of understanding oneself; (2) understand that parenting is a learned skill; (3) understand how personality is shaped by culture and environment; (4) be able to define concepts related to sexuality; (5) understand how present attitudes and feelings about sex relate to past experiences, information and misinformation; (6) understand how one's attitudes and feelings affect what parents tell and how they tell their children about sex; and (7) be able to identify some personal values, feelings, and attitudes about sex that parents want to pass on to their children. The newsletter is presented in workbook format with spaces provided for parents to write answers to questions and exercises. It concludes with a reference list and a short list of suggested readings for parents. (NB)

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Growing Pains

SEX EDUCATION FOR PARENTS

A Newsletter Series

by

The University of Connecticut
Cooperative Extension Service

Letter I	SEXUALITY
Letter II	Self-Esteem
Letter III	Puberty/Adolescence
Letter IV	Communication and Negotiation
Letter V	Talking About Sex

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Letter I
SEXUALITY

At the end of this letter you should:

- know the importance of understanding yourself.
- understand that parenting is a learned skill.
- understand how personality is shaped by culture and environment.
- be able to define concepts related to sexuality.
- understand how present attitudes and feelings about sex relate to past experiences, information and misinformation.
- understand how your attitudes and feelings affect what you tell and how you tell your children about sex.
- be able to identify some personal values, feelings, and attitudes about sex that you want to pass on to your children.

INTRODUCTION

Today many young people make far-reaching social and sexual decisions without clear, well-considered values or accurate information. They must make sense of the conflicting messages and information they receive from their families, the media, peers, schools and other institutions. Parents seem to be hesitant if not afraid to talk to their children about this most important part of their lives. Children do not readily approach their parents for answers to their questions in this emotionally-charged area of their life.

The goal of GROWING PAINS is to help you increase your ability to communicate with your adolescent about sexual issues. This five-letter series will: explore the origins of your feelings about sex; teach the importance of a healthy self-concept and how to build it in your adolescent; unravel the physical, social and emotional mysteries of adolescence; and develop some skills that will help you talk about sex with your "new" person, the adolescent.

Initial work on this project was conducted by Joan Polulech, M.S.W., in 1983 as part of a Pregnancy Prevention Program which was Funded by the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, DHHS.

Even though you can talk to your adolescents about a lot of things you may have difficulty in talking to them about the sexual area of their lives.

This does not mean that you are a bad parent and that all is lost. Almost all families find it difficult to talk with their adolescent about **The Subject of Sex.**

The early adolescent (ages 9-14) has many questions on the subject of sex, their bodies, and relationships with their family and friends. You as a parent have many questions and concerns also. Many of them center around being a good parent. You want to raise your children to become confident, competent, and mature adults.

As children reach early adolescence they have already or will soon start to experience changes in their bodies that prepare them to be fathers or mothers. We say they are going through puberty. They start to become interested in sex and all that the word sex brings to your mind. For most of them it is a search for knowledge and an understanding of what is happening to them physically and emotionally.

At this time you may find your relationship with your adolescent changing. You may have many feelings that you cannot describe let alone figure out where they are coming from. You may also find yourself reacting to behaviors and questions from your adolescent in a way that you do not understand. You may worry about this and even feel guilty because you do not handle the situations that arise in the "right" way. We have been given the message — **To be a good parent is to know all.** Parents are very often blamed but we are usually not trained. Actress June Lockhart said "Unfortunately, there are no parenting schools. You earn while you learn..."

Stop reading, and take a few minutes to answer the following question.

FROM WHOM, WHAT OR WHERE DID YOU LEARN ABOUT BEING A PARENT?
(write the answer in the space provided)

Now answer the following question.

FROM WHOM AND WHERE DID YOU LEARN ABOUT SEX?
(yes, write the answers in the space provided.)

Chances are, you learned your parenting skills "piecemeal" as most of us did. This is also how most of us learned about sex.

Just the word sex itself means different things to different people. When talking to our adolescent or anyone else we need to know what the word sex means to them. This will help us so we are talking about the same thing. What comes to your mind when you hear the word sex? Think about it before you read on and write it down.

Now that you have written down what sex means to you, ask your adolescents what the word sex means to them. Compare the two definitions. You may find that you agree on what it means or you may be miles apart. If you do not agree, take a risk: **DISCUSS THESE DIFFERENCES WITH YOUR ADOLESCENTS.**

Some of the things that might have come to mind were: how to get pregnant, making love, having fun, duty to my spouse, dirty word, or a total commitment.

DEFINITIONS Before we can help you learn more about yourself, your values and your feelings relating to sex and sexuality, we need to clarify some terms that are often misunderstood or are confusing. For this course we will use the following definitions:

Gender or Sex: refers to whether a person is male or female.

Sexualization: is the process, which takes place from birth through life, whereby an individual learns what it is to be male or female in our society.

Sexuality: refers to how we feel and think about ourselves, physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and intellectually. The end result of sexualization.

Sexual Identity: is the awareness a person has of being male or female.

Sexual Intercourse: refers to the act of putting the penis in the vagina.

Gender Roles: refers to the behaviors and activities that people assume to be appropriate for males and females.

Value: something that is regarded as desirable, of worth, or right. This could be a behavior, a belief, a standard, or a moral precept.

Feelings: emotions such as joy, anger, sad, happy, produced upon a person by an object, place, word, and/or an action, etc.

Sperm: the mature male reproductive cell capable of fertilizing the female egg.

Ovum or Egg: the mature female reproductive cell capable of being fertilized.

Conception or Fertilization: the uniting of egg and sperm which results in the beginning of a new life.

Chromosomes: small rod shaped bodies found in the nucleus of all body cells which contain the genes or heredity factors.

Fetus: in humans the unborn young from the third month after conception until birth.

Puberty: the stage of life at which a child turns physically into a young man or young woman: i.e. the reproductive organs become capable of reproducing another human being.

Adolescence: the social and emotional growth that takes place during puberty.

SEXUALIZATION: YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

As YOU grew up, some of the most important things you learned had to do with what it means to be a boy or a man and a girl or a woman in our society. This process, called SEXUALIZATION, began at the moment of conception. Because the male sperm carries both male and female sex chromosomes, the sex of the child is determined by the sex chromosome of the male. The egg from the female always carries an "X" chromosome. If the sperm that fertilizes the egg is also carrying a female chromosome, or "X" the child will be female. If the sperm is carrying a male chromosome of "Y" the child will be male.

During the first two years of life, parents and others, without realizing it, spend a great deal of time giving their babies clues about what it means to be a male or female.

As you grew from infancy, you learned from your own experiences and from observing those around you just what was considered "good" or appropriate behavior for you as a boy and eventually a man or a girl and eventually a woman. This was helping you develop your attitudes and values as to how you feel about yourself and how you would act toward other people. Think back to when you were between 9 and 14 years old. List some of the things you remember it being alright for boys to do but not for girls and things that girls could do but boys could not.

BOYS	GIRLS
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

You are and have been since the conception of your children teaching them what it means to be a male or female in your society.

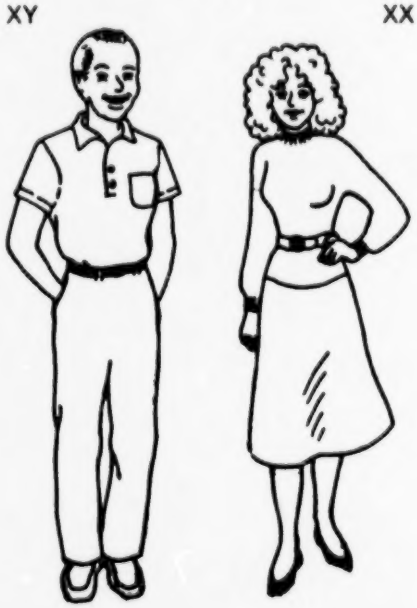
Now list or think about the things you have said to your children that would teach them what is alright for boys to do but not girls or alright for girls to do but not boys.

BOYS	GIRLS
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Are there any similarities between what you are teaching your children and what you were taught? Yes, go back and compare the two lists before you continue.

Do any of the things you remember from your childhood or what you have been teaching your children look like this?

XY XX



XY XX

BRAVE	TIMID
AGGRESSIVE	EMOTIONAL
UNEMOTIONAL	GENTLE
STRONG	SENSITIVE

3

From childhood most of us act out the "gender role" (male or female) that we are taught and see around us. Traditionally, the male gender role has been labeled "masculine." Boys have been taught and expected to show their "masculinity" by being aggressive, bold and unemotional. Traditionally, the female gender role has been labeled "feminine." Therefore, girls have been expected to show their "femininity" by being passive, timid and emotional.

You come from an "enlightened" generation and may not have been teaching your children these traditional gender roles. Possibly what you have been teaching your children may look like this.

XY

STRONG

ASSERTIVE

TENDER

SENSITIVE

EMOTIONAL

XX

EMOTIONAL

ASSERTIVE

TENDER

SENSITIVE

STRONG

There are many today who think boys and men should be just as sensitive as girls and women, and that girls and women should be just as assertive as boys and men.

These gender roles influence our behavior. They influence how we talk, walk, dress, make love and how we behave in any other number of ways. The totality of our behavior is called our sexuality. Anna Freud once said, "Sex is something we do. Sexuality is something we are..."

The gender role that you accept has a direct influence on all of your decisions including sexual decisions. You can accept the traditional gender role or develop your own. Isn't it nice to know that you can continue thinking and feeling the way you do now or you can change?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND YOURSELF?

Values, Attitudes and Feelings

Long ago the wise men of Greece inscribed on one of their temples the motto KNOW THY SELF. They believed that this understanding was necessary for a happy and satisfying life. We think it is still good advice. Understanding oneself is the key to understanding other people. Understanding ourselves as sexual human beings, which we all are, involves thinking about some of the values and attitudes about sex we have been taking for granted all our lives. Understanding ourselves also helps us understand what attitudes and values we are passing on to our children.

What you teach your children, immediately after birth and during the time they are with you, by your actions and words **helps** develop their attitudes and values. Yes, helps, for you are not the only one influencing your childrens' attitudes and values. Some of the more obvious are relatives, teachers, clergy friends, and peers. There is also the radio, television, newspapers and magazines.

A not so obvious influence is myths. Myths are as ancient as human kind, created out of a need to find explanations for life's mysteries, something we do not fully understand. The subject of sex and sexuality has always been surrounded by myths, distortions of facts and just plain wrong information. Myths and misinformation contribute to the formation of our attitudes and feelings about sex and sexuality. These feelings and attitudes are passed on from generation to generation and help develop the values we place on sexual activity and influence how we conduct ourselves as human beings.

Sometimes we adopt the values or a value of our parents or society without determining what we really feel and think about them.

Listed below are seven sexual areas in which differences of opinion may occur, not only between parents and their adolescents but among members of our society in general. Write down your thoughts and feelings about each of the following.

YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ABOUT:	WHERE DID YOU GET THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS:
Masturbation:	
Homosexuality:	
Premarital sex:	
Nudity in the home:	
Abortion:	
Sex education in the School:	
Contraception:	

Values are not learned; they are taught from what a person experiences. It starts in the family in those very first years and continues on through adolescence. In the family you can provide the opportunity for your adolescents to question, discuss, or think through your values. By allowing this to happen you have a greater chance for "your values" to become "their values."

For a belief or an idea to become a value:
it must be chosen freely,
chosen from alternatives after due reflection,
and then acted upon or defended publicly.

Now look back at the exercise on Your Thoughts and Feelings and Where You Got Them and ask yourself: Are these my values? If they are you will have: chosen them freely, from among alternatives after due reflection, and acted on them or defended them in public. Based on the results of what you just did, what value do you want to pass on to your adolescent about:

Masturbation_____

Homosexuality_____

Premarital sex_____

_____

_____

Nudity in the home_____

_____

_____

Abortion_____

_____

_____

Sex education in the school_____

_____

_____

Contraception_____

_____

_____

Ideally, your choices will be made on the basis of the values you hold because your values determine:

what you think is worthwhile in life;
what you prize, cherish and hold as good or bad;
the rightness or wrongness of an act, saying or thought;
your basic aims, objectives, aspirations and ideals.

We hope this has helped you clarify what you believe and why you believe it about these important topics. If it has, you will be able to communicate your values about sexuality more clearly and with greater conviction to your adolescents. Even though you present your ideas clearly and with conviction your adolescents may not adopt your values as their own. Whether or not they think your values are silly or old fashioned, you have a right to tell them what you think, how you feel, and where you stand. Likewise they have a right to form their own values whether they are the same as yours or different.

Now that you have finished this exercise complete the following sentences.

I feel:_____

_____

_____

I want to tell my children:_____

_____

_____

I want to change:_____

_____

_____

I don't want to change:_____

_____

_____

I want to learn more about:_____

_____

_____

LABELS AND GENDER ROLES

We set each other up to act in certain ways by treating them as we think a man or woman should be treated. Therefore, another thing that affects our behavior is our expectation of what a man or a woman is and does or "should" do. How do you picture a man or woman? The exercise below will help you draw that picture.

Labels Exercise:

Place an "M" in front of each word that you think describes men more than women. Place an "F" in front of each word that you think describes women more than men. Place a "B" in front of each word that you think equally describes men and women.

adventurous	good cook	sexy	aggressive
graceful	soft	big	hairy
strong	boss	hard	sweet
brave	helpless	talkative	breadwinner
hero	tall	cute	independent
tender	dainty	innocent	tough
domineering	loud	unmechanical	dumb
assertive	wholesome	emotional	nagging
dependent	intelligent	giggly	quiet
gentle	sensitive	gossip	clumsy

Now go back and place a (+) in front of those words that are positive and a (–) in front of those words that are negative. After you decide which words are positive and which are negative answer the following questions.

1. Do you see one sex as having more positive traits than the other?

   Yes ☐ No ☐ Which one? _____

2. Do you have both masculine and feminine traits?

   Yes ☐ No ☐ Which ones? _____

3. Do you ever envy people of the opposite sex for their freedom to do certain things or to feel certain emotions?

   Yes ☐ No ☐ Which ones? _____

4. If you are doing this lesson with others do you agree on which traits are feminine and which are masculine?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   Were you surprised at each others answers? If you were, talk about it.

5. How might some of these characteristics affect a person's ability to make decisions?

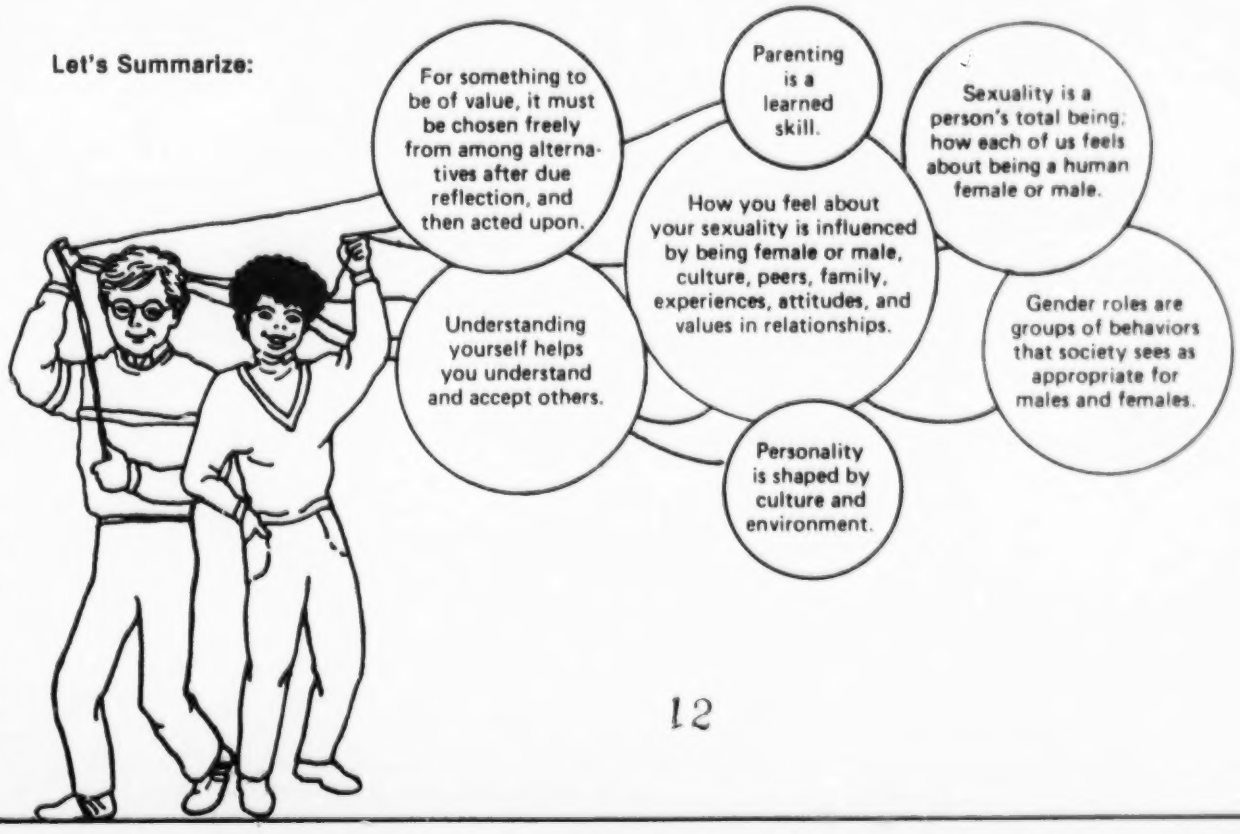
6. How might your life have been different if you had been born a man instead of a woman or a woman instead of a man?

Which words from the above exercise do you hope will describe your male and female children as they mature?

MALE	FEMALE
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

After you finish this exercise, ask your 9 to 14-year-old to do it. Compare your answers and discuss why you agreed or disagreed on the traits.

Let's Summarize:


For something to be of value, it must be chosen freely from among alternatives after due reflection, and then acted upon.
Parenting is a learned skill.
Sexuality is a person's total being; how each of us feels about being a human female or male.
How you feel about your sexuality is influenced by being female or male, culture, peers, family, experiences, attitudes, and values in relationships.
Understanding yourself helps you understand and accept others.
Gender roles are groups of behaviors that society sees as appropriate for males and females.
Personality is shaped by culture and environment.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

The Family Book About Sexuality by Mary Calderone, (Action oriented book whose intent is to describe many things we as parents, educators, legislators, religious leaders and media can do to promote sexual health.)

Learning About Sex by Gary Kelly. (A book designed to clear the air, answer questions in specific and understandable terms and help build a positive, reasonable understanding of sexuality. It contains activities that you and your adolescent can do together.)

The Sexual Adolescent: Communicating with Teenagers About Sex by Sol Gordon, Peter Scales, and Kathleen Everly. North Scituate, MA. Duxbury Press, 1979. (A book for older adolescents, covers the facts and feelings about sex and sexuality in today's world of confusing and all too often misinformation.)

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